



A glass model of a radiolarian created by Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka in the late nineteenth century.

NATURAL HISTORY

Diamonds in the rough

Ewen Callaway delights in a cherry-picked selection of the London Natural History Museum's gargantuan trove.

Thousands thronged London's Tate Modern gallery this spring to see a diamond-encrusted platinum cast of a human skull worth a cool £50 million: Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God*. Now, across town at the venerable Natural History Museum, gems of a different sort await.

The *Treasures* exhibition features another skeletal presence, an *Archaeopteryx* imprisoned in a slate slab, along with 21 other well-chosen objects. Not convinced that the 150-million-year-old slab competes with Hirstian bling? True, the museum paid German collector Karl Häberlein just £700 (equivalent to about £50,000 today) for the fossil in the 1860s. But *Archaeopteryx* offered the first evidence that birds evolved from dinosaurs, and palaeontologists considered the beast to have been the first bird until only recently, when fossils from China suggested it

Treasures

NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM, LONDON

might instead have been a feathered dinosaur.

The fossil, which is on display for the first time, was last year declared the 'type specimen' of *Archaeopteryx*, and is the only one with a fully preserved brain imprint on the inside of its skull. Such anecdotes are a highlight of *Treasures*, and are engagingly told using interactive touch displays besides each piece. They provide necessary context for the curious non-scientist, and show how natural history museums can remain relevant in a world of cheap travel and ubiquitous high-definition footage.

Few objects are more fetching than a glass rendering of the single-celled *Aulosphaera elegantissima* — a member of the radiolarian group of protozoa — enlarged tens of times.

It is one of 185 models that the museum purchased in the late nineteenth century from the Blaschkas, a glass-working family based in Germany.

It is a shame that there is room for only one page from the world's most expensive book, John J. Audubon's extraordinary *The Birds of America*. The pages were released serially between 1827 and 1838, and with only 120 complete original editions of the metre-high book known to survive (two owned by the Natural History Museum), copies now sell for millions of dollars. Fortunately, however, there is an interactive version at the free exhibition's entrance, allowing visitors to flick through the natural-history classic, renowned for both action-packed depictions and Romantic styling.

Unsurprisingly, extinction abounds here. The twin bird exhibits — a dodo skeleton and a preserved great auk — represent creatures that humans hunted to death, and speak of how natural history and human history interweave.

Scientists disagree over our role in the extinction of Neanderthals, *Homo sapiens'* big-bodied relative, which died out around 30,000 years ago. The species is named after Germany's Neander Valley, where the first recognized Neanderthal fossilized remains were found in 1856. If the skull on display at the *Treasures* exhibition had been correctly classified when it was discovered eight years earlier, we would be speaking of Gibraltar Man. The exhibit explains that scientists collected DNA from other Neanderthals and discovered that the species interbred with humans, reinforcing the fact that dinosaur-packed institutions such as the Natural History Museum also host cutting-edge science.

Yet another theme of *Treasures* is the history of natural history. An example is provided by three exhibits displayed side by side: a signed first edition of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*; the remains of pigeons that helped Darwin to make a case for natural selection; and a stunning lepidoptera collection that once belonged to Alfred Russell Wallace, the overlooked co-proponent of evolution by natural selection.

Also on display are some of the 200-million-year-old ammonite fossils that led William Smith, the father of modern geology, to deduce that Earth consists of geological layers that record the deep past. And herbarium pressings, belonging to a director of the Dutch East India Company, George Clifford, that helped a young doctor named Carl Linnaeus to devise a revolutionary naming system for all species.

Rocks, bones, dried plants and insects may never fetch as much on the black market as diamonds and precious metals. But the ideas they inspired are priceless. ■

Ewen Callaway is a reporter for Nature.